Rethinking a *Better Life* – (Im)mobility Experiences of Vilnius Roma Families

Agnieška Avin (Institute of Sociology at the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences)

Abstract. Most of the Vilnius Roma families are actively engaged in transnational family networks shaping their everyday life, their social imaginations and life trajectories. When discussing the migratory experiences and the meaning of a better life, there is a constant comparison between 'here' and 'there', or between lives in Lithuania and abroad. 'Here' is a place where Roma are always spotted and stigmatised, while 'there' assures invisibility and, hence, more opportunities. The circulating ideals about the 'abroad' can be read as a disappointment with a life 'here' – what is idealised, fantasised and seen as a goal 'out there', it is what people would wish to have in Lithuania. This comparison and lived experiences are becoming a collective community knowledge that is shared among all generations – one does not have to really experience life abroad to know that there is a place where everyone "can feel a human being." But can the imagined paradise be also criticised and questioned? Can a better life be related only to some geographical space and socio-economic experiences? This chapter is based on a long-term ethnographic fieldwork among Vilnius Roma families.

Keywords: Transnational family networks, better life, Vilnius Roma, social imaginations, social exclusion.

Vlada came to my office on a Friday afternoon – our work day was about to finish. "Agnieška, I want to go to England with my family," she said. I found this decision unexpected at that time even though I had already heard about many of her relatives living in the UK for more than 10 years. "Can you help me to find flight tickets?" she asked me with a genuine smile on her face. She seemed excited and confident with her decision. I opened Google Chrome and we dug into searching the cheapest and most convenient flight options. Ten minutes later I already had a one-way ticket from Vilnius to Liverpool in my e-mail box under Vlada's name. She would leave in four days. Next day, I received an e-mail from *Ryanair Holdings Plc* informing that, under new regulations, all passengers travelling to the UK were required to fill in an immigration form. It was a new law which entered into force after Brexit. I called Vlada's mother Aldona to clarify the daughter's passport details which I needed to finish the check-in registration.

Aldona's heart was breaking, she confessed with a deep sigh that she was sad to bid farewell to the eldest daughter. When I printed the boarding pass, Vlada's brother Germanas came with his uncle and younger brother to pick it up. "Are you happy your sister is leaving?" I asked Germanas that day. "Yes, I think I am. It would be much better for her *there*."

In this chapter, I will follow the transnational (im)mobility experiences and imaginations about a better life and how it is described, experienced and imagined by Vilnius Roma families. As my research revealed, Roma migrate westward not only to create better financial well-being, but also to escape discrimination and racial stigmatisation imposed on them in the country of origin. While constantly comparing and negotiating life *here* and *there*, my informants guided me through what it feels to be Roma *here*, in Lithuania, and *there*, in England (or elsewhere, abroad), and how (im)mobility experiences enhance social imagination about *a better life* on different sides of national borders.

Methodology

The fieldwork data was gathered during an ethnographic research carried out in Vilnius among Roma who had at least one immediate relative living abroad and/or had some migration experience by themselves. My initial intention was to interview Roma from Vilnius whose relatives had migrated to mostly Western countries but who had never been abroad themselves. However, when I started to mingle around and raise migration-related questions, I quickly realised that it would be hard to find informants without previous experience of engaging in transnational mobility. Even though I was sure that some of my informants had never travelled abroad, longer conversations proved I was wrong. Finally, I decided to include both, and to extend my research coverage to those who had lived abroad and/or had close relatives living abroad. This fact is crucial in focusing my research on (im)mobility experiences as my informants drew their experiences, notions and imaginations about life *here* and *there* from both personal and communal experiences, and it was difficult to define a clear line between what is a personal experience and what is a circulating knowledge or experience of others. Hence, by (im)mobility experiences, I mean both the experience of those who had lived abroad for a longer period of time by themselves and returned to the country of origin, and those who had never been abroad but were keeping close contacts with family members who had emigrated, which strongly impacted their imaginations about the life abroad.

I started my fieldwork in September 2020, and I continued it until the end of February 2021. Even though the main fieldwork was carried out in 2020/2021, some of my data dates back to 2018 and 2019 when I had my first conversations with Roma families about their transnational (im)mobility experiences and I became interested in the topic. During the fieldwork, I returned to some of these families to carry out semi-structured interviews.

My ethnographic data is based on conversations and interactions with 18 informants, with 12 of whom I had conducted semi-structured interviews. The main site of my research (and participant observation) were two extended families residing in Vilnius City who clearly identified themselves as Roma – in total 10 people (excluding children under 16). I named them Aldona's and Liza's families. As my research revealed, for my informants, the family is a primary context in which migration practices and imaginaries take place. It is an *emic* perspective through which transnational (im)mobility is experienced, practiced, and imagined. Transnational family networks deserve additional theorisation and specification, however, it is not the subject of my paper this time.

My main informants had been connected with each other via kinship and familial ties constituting close-knit transnational family networks. Both families had been affected by the transnational mobility of their relatives (or themselves), and almost all family members to some extent had been participating in these (im)mobility processes. It really facilitated the study of how a family becomes a primary field of social practices and migrations surpassing national borders (Sørensen and Olwig 2001). Moreover, the practiced relationships between mobile and immobile family members showed how relatives living abroad play an important role in the definition and decision-making of the family members back home, leading them to reconfigure their imaginations, aspirations, and expectations (Tamagno 2001).

I had a reliable gatekeeper – my youngest informant Germanas, a son of Aldona, (at the time of my fieldwork, he was 16 years old) who introduced me to the whole of his family and enabled a deep and strong contact with the majority of the family members living in Vilnius (7 people in total). Members of Aldona's and Liza's families constituted more than half of all my informants I interviewed during the fieldwork. Other five informants were individuals not related to these families by kin, but they were members of their own transnational family networks. I was able to reach them by personal contacts and the snowball method. All of them were regular visitors in the Day Centre and the Community Centre.

I would argue that the conclusions of my research go beyond the (im) mobility experiences of just these two Roma families from Vilnius. First of all,

the lived experiences and the socio-economic situation of people who identify themselves as Roma are quite similar in Vilnius, and in Lithuania in general (Kontvainė 2020). It also shows that the two families I chose as my main site can be contextualised in a broader Vilnius Roma community, and their experiences could be representative of Vilnius Roma (im)mobility experiences at large. I do not want to generalise and homogenise Vilnius Roma as a single entity. It is definitely a more diverse group, but my research would illuminate a dominating narrative and attitudes within Vilnius Roma community.

Theoretical approach

While interacting with Roma community in Vilnius, and elsewhere in Lithuania, I have not met a single family which would not have someone close living abroad. Whenever we would meet, some would be welcoming and others would be bidding farewell to their brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, mothers, fathers and grandparents who were about to hit the road (or take a flight) to England or any other Western destination, and others finally coming back home after months (and sometimes years) of living abroad. It was a repeating experience of mine – hearing someone stay and someone go, come back, stay a little bit and go abroad again. Everyday interactions with Roma families were inseparable from stories about international migrations, dreaming about *luchshaya zhizn'* (Rus. a better life) abroad and the issues they were facing at home. It made me think that transnational mobility constitutes an important part of everyday Roma experiences, but it was clear that not everyone is mobile, and that not everyone is migrating. So how does migration impact the ones who are staying?

A recent so-called 'mobility turn' in migration studies calls to pay greater attention to immobility and recognise its complex and compound character (Schewel 2015). Aileen Stockdale and Tialda Haartsen (2018) in the editorial introduction of the journal *Population, Space and Place* call for the adoption of an immobility perspective and stimulate others to consider stayers as active participants and staying as an active process. Staying put should be viewed as a conscious and deliberate decision with explicit outcomes. By adopting an immobility perspective, focusing on the processes of staying (rather than on why people did not move), the agency of stayers could be recognised, and different perceptions and interrelations of staying could be uncovered.

Mata-Codesal argues that (im)mobility is a complex research category which entails very different reasons, motivations and meanings, just as transnational

mobility. Similar to migration, it can be an embodied experience, culturally constructed and socially enacted (Mata-Codesal 2015). It is important to add, though, that despite the slow recognition of the importance of immobility for the initiation, development, and maintenance of migratory projects, migration studies have incorporated immobility and non-migrants in the research on transnational families and migrant networks (Mata-Codesal 2018).

Literature on immobility suggests that, for many non-migrants, staying also reflects and requires agency; it is a conscious choice that is renegotiated and repeated throughout the life course, hence it is not a stable condition, it is a dynamical process (Gray 2011; Hjälm 2011; Mata-Codesal 2018; Preece 2017; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). As different ethnographic research show, staying is not merely a solitary condition, vacuumed from interrelations with others. It is a highly connected and complementary state within different life projects. In other words, staying is connected to other people and life strategies (Hjälm 2014), and mobility and immobility are interchanging practices.

As burgeoning immobility literature suggests, those 'left behind' are not always 'stuck' as they are sometimes referred to, but are a far more heterogeneous group in terms of the personal conditions, household compositions, motivations, and diverse family livelihood strategies. Stayers can be forced, involuntary, desired, attached/detached, tied, rooted/unrooted, intentional/unintended, etc., so it is never a singular homogenous group. In other words, immobility is 'involuntary' for some but 'desirable' for many others (Carling 2018; Hjälm 2014; Jingzhong 2018; Mata-Codesal 2018; Schewel, Carling 2018; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018).

One should be aware of relationality between mobility and immobility and to challenge the binary opposition which denies the simultaneity of connection and differentiation between the two. As I already wrote above, during my research, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish the experiences of mobility and immobility among my informants in terms of whether they came from personal encounters or from circulating collective imaginations. I decided to use the term *(im)mobility* to highlight the close connection between staying and going.

Another important category that I focused on in my research was the one of social imaginaries. A growing number of anthropological literature engages with the role of the imagination in migration processes. Arjun Appadurai back in 1996 stated that the imagination had become an organised field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and a culturally organised practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibilities (Appadurai 1996, 2004). He stressed that many people 'today' (i.e. at the time of his paper) live in such imagined worlds,

and these imaginaries penetrate everyday practices which have become an inseparable element of understanding (and creating) our surrounding in the context of (im)mobility (Appadurai 1996).

The concept of imaginaries is essential for trying to transcendent the binary division of motion and fixity. Even when a person is tied to a place, he or she can move across the globe through the imaginaries fuelled by mass-media, states, organisations, collective memory, religiosity or stories of relative migrants and/or returnees. The imaginaries of mobility can impact one's experience of staying put. Studying and questioning imaginaries of (im)mobility gives an opportunity to grasp the ongoing global transformations, they can also act as imagined alternatives to international migration (Salazar 2010).

Echoing Appadurai and Salazar, the imaginations are not naturally 'existing inside people's minds' but are shaped through engagements with the material and the ideal (Ingold 2013). Besides that, imaginaries are constructed "within a landscape of multiple and at times competing visions of what *should* be imagined and what *should* be desired" (Chambers 2018, 1422). Migration imaginations is a socially constructed project – when everyone around is talking about *a better life* abroad, one also starts to imagine it as an option. Hence, (im)mobility imaginaries can have an impact on life aspirations – by idealising and imagining abroad as 'another world', new wants, needs, dreams, expectations and calculations can be developed, and new forms of attitudes can be formed (Carling, 2008, 2014). The imaginaries exist in different configurations and are not fixed to time and space – they can change over time. They also do not exist in a social vacuum – various legal, social, economic, cultural and political circumstances, which rearrange mobility-immobility decisions, can impact how and why the abroad is imagined.

Enhanced (im)mobility imaginations (cultivated by personal and collective mobility experiences) can be viewed as "new subjectivities or forms of consciousness that may offer challenges to normalized hierarchies, structures, or inequalities" (Chambers 2018, 1424). By imagining *a better life* possible somewhere, not here, it challenges "the given repertoire of lived lives and revealing its restrictions" (Römhild 2003, 22).

The broadened social horizons brought by migration imaginaries can be seen as "a form of resistance to existing imbalances of power and economic constraints" (Salazar 2010, 12). When a personal mode of existence *here* is circumscribed by a lack of means to achieve substantial socio-economic changes and communicate these struggles in public, (im)mobility imaginaries can become an ultimate space for social critique where experienced social injustice can be addressed and social rights reclaimed (Jónsson 2008).

(Im)mobility imaginaries do not serve solely to praise and idealize 'other worlds'. Foreign places can be imagined as preferable due to economic circumstances and cosmopolitan lifestyles, but they not always bring overall satisfaction. Noel Salazar concludes that, among Tanzanian youth, imaginations "also offer critiques that illustrate that overseas migration is best envisioned as a temporary endeavour undertaken mainly to improve one's life at home" (p. 5). Gardner stated that, by imagining foreign worlds, those who have never migrated can develop an ambivalent relationship with the homeland (Salazar 2011, after Gardner 1993). (Im)mobility imaginations, however, can also have an opposite effect – sometimes imagining moving abroad where one does not speak the language, does not have family and does not feel being in a right place, can reinforce personal attachments and belonging in the country of origin. Ultimately, personal aspirations filter imaginaries and ideas of other possible places and lives (Salazar 2020).

Finally, there is a growing academic interest in the 'Roma migration' field as such. The narrative of mass migrations by Roma from Central and Eastern Europe to the Western countries is exaggerated and shaped by media and politicians, especially those of the right-wing alliance, contributing to the stigmatisation and *othering* of European Roma. In a public discourse, Roma migrants are under a magnifying glass despite the real intensity of their engagement in the international mobility, and, as various estimates show, they are not the most dominant migrant group in Europe. As Vera Messing (2019) states, the scope of international migrations of Roma in the European perspective is insignificant as most Roma "are too powerless and lack the funds to be mobile" (p. 23). Scholars explain it that in Europe Roma are being perceived as rather a 'racialized minority' and not just an ethnic group. (Kocze, Van Baar 2020; Sardelić 2019). The existing 'imagination' of massive migration flows by Roma spurred the academic interest in the topic over the past few decades.

Literature of Roma migrations which I have examined (Fiałkowska et al. 2018(a), 2018(b), 2018(c), 2020; Grill 2012, 2018; Magazzini andPiemontese 2016, 2019; Messing 2019; Sardelić 2019; Tremlett 2014) is mainly focused on the westward mobility and new integration strategies, policies concerning Roma migrants, gender issues, kinship networks, and the changing identity patterns. In-depth qualitative methodology and ethnographic accounts of lived experiences of individuals and families of the Roma origin are especially useful and valuable because they allow to see how Roma themselves perceive and make sense of their migratory processes. This information can hardly be captured by just national statistics or surveys.

There has been no qualitative research on the topic in Lithuania before, and my study aims at investigating it for the first time. There are, however, new and profound research in the field from Central European scholars who were very helpful and inspiring for my research process. I found qualitative studies by Polish anthropologists and social scientists, such as Kamila Fiałkowska (2018, 2020), Michał Gerapich (2018, 2020) and Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz (2018, 2020), who investigated the recent migration experiences of the Polish Roma, very valuable and helpful for my own work. Their works are a result of a consistent and long-term ethnographic observation of Roma migrations from Poland, mostly from the area of Southern Poland. Slovak anthropologist Jan Grill (2018) is another significant scholar whose work about Slovak Roma migrations to Britain helped me to better understand how a racialised 'darkness' imposed on Roma bodies shape (im)mobility experiences and imaginaries among Vilnius Roma.

Empirical findings

Vlada's brother Germanas is a great saviour when it concerns family matters. He is always there to support departing relatives and meet the returning ones, he genuinely wishes her sister to succeed abroad because "it would be better for her. Maybe she will learn English, maybe she will find a job. Not like here" (Germanas, 16). He knows that there she will have her life easier, that her being Roma will not be such a stigmatising experience as here. And he perfectly knows what he means. Germanas attends a Russian language school in Naujininkai District in Vilnius, the capital city. He likes it there, he has friends, he is good at math, all of his siblings are attending the same school. However, a few years ago he was not that satisfied with the education process. Together with his after-school tutors, there was a decision to switch schools – Germanas started attending a Lithuanian language school in a district which was supposed to be of higher standards. But his experience was devastating. "There was lots of bullying happening" – Germanas remembers a few years later. "They would call me *juodas* (Lit. *black*), *čigonas* (Lit. *gypsy*) and other stuff. At first, I was angry, I wanted to hit them back, but later I just stopped paying attention." He started to skip lessons, he would not participate in after-class activities. That year, Germanas did not finish his school year – he decided to take a break, disconnect from everyone and everything. He returned only next autumn – but already back to the old school.

His grandmother Natalija is despaired hearing how her grandchildren are treated and feel at school, and in general public:

N: Out there *people are not divided like* here. *People are divided, harmed here, and there they are not.*
Me: How are they divided here?
N: Here people are divided, children go to school, and they are divided at school.
Me: What do you mean by divided?
N: Well, like her [pointing at her granddaughter – my remark], *she is Roma, I am Lithuanian and so on. People get away from her, stare at her weirdly, everything, insult her.*
Me: At school?
N: Yes, it happens also at school, there are lots of stories like that.
Me: And how is there then?
N: Ten užsienyje *(Lit. there, abroad) no one divides people into us and them. It doesn't matter which nation you are, everyone is equal. There they don't divide people by nations, for sure. There is another culture towards people, everyone behaves well with others, everyone is polite. Children feel fine at school. If someone sees that you are in trouble, they will come, ask if everything is alright. And here, if people saw you, everyone would just pass by. Everyone would pass by. Children might be in trouble, attacked. No one would say anything* (an extract from interview with Natalija, 50*).*

"There I could just be" – (in)visibility of (im)mobility

For my informants, 'abroad' gains almost a mythical status of a multicultural land with equal rights for everyone. For them, the migration process and experiences of the new destination is more than just moving from a relatively homogenous Lithuanian capital to the more diverse urban areas in the UK. For them, it is an escape from the dominating white Lithuanian gaze, as Jan Grill (2018) would frame it, to the place where "we can feel normal humans as anyone else" (Natalija, 50). It assures desired invisibility. *Here*, Roma feel always being in a spotlight, they are trapped in a fixed category of suspicion and stigmatisation. Every time Germanas walks on the street, he feels "those looks of people, as something we did wrong, as if we owe something to someone" (Germanas, 16).

On the contrary, "there no one would even guess I am Roma. It is so diverse there. If I go to work, it is only a human, a simple human came. It is all about humans, there is nothing like *here*. There is no difference what is your eye colour, what is your nationality, none of these things" (Marina, 35).

This invisibility allows liberating oneself from prescribed fixed identities and preconceived notions, it allows being finally 'a simple human-being'. This human-

comes-first approach – which Vilnius Roma imagine to find abroad – becomes existential, even metaphysical:

> If we talk about Roma, about our nation, and to think where I would just feel myself better, it is definitely in another country. I would feel myself svobodnee (Rus. freer**), I could just be**. I lived in England, so I know. I felt myself good there. No one pays attention to you, no one looks at you from above that you are Roma, or Jewish, or anyone else. But here – you have no choice, you are always spotted (Marina, 35).

In the diverse multicultural environment, the skin colour and appearance are not automatically ascribed to the negative social capital of being Roma (Grill, 2018) as compared to their daily existence in Lithuania. British Roma Jonathan Lee, who is currently working as an Advocacy & Communication Manager at European Roma Rights Centre, in one of the podcast series titled *The Romani Tea Room. What about Brexit*? shares his insights of being Roma in the UK. His explanations coincide with Vilnius Roma (im)mobility experiences:

> In the UK, Roma don't stand out as they would in Eastern Europe which is predominantly white. The UK is one of the most multicultural countries in Europe. Roma migrate to cities which are very diverse. They don't look like what majority of British people think how Gypsy look like. For a while they could pass under the radar to some extent. However, Roma learn not to advertise their ethnicity as British Roma do as there is still a high level of accepted anti-gypsism (Lee 2018).

Vilnius Roma families, however, rarely encountered direct anty-gypsism compared to their experiences at home. Vladimir shared one personal story which he interpreted as a general example of the local Lithuanian hostility towards Roma:

> V: Once I was going to the market in Rudamina [a small town in Southern Lithuania – my remark] by bus, and one guy started to insult me.
> Me: Because you are Roma?
> V: Yes, 'Look at you, you are Gypsies, you steal, you go from home to home, you steal, you do this, you do that'. And what you think – he grabbed my throat, pulled me to the window, and I could not do anything. And all the Lithuanians sitting in the bus – they did nothing, they said nothing. Only the driver. He said: 'What are you doing, let him go'.

P: He opened the door and pulled the guy out of the bus. 'Go out now or I will call the police'.

V: But this guy called out to fight. You understand. If I go to fight with him, hit him hard, he goes to police, and I will go to jail. Maybe by accident, but I can harm him hard, maybe even deadly. And then what. I will be guilty, no matter what. Because they are Lithuanians, they would support each other, not us. This is how it is here, you understand. If one Roma guy did something somewhere, some idiot, we all will be blamed for that. In England it would not happen (Patrina, 43, and Vladimir, 44).

It is not only the British diversity that releases Vilnius Roma from the stigma. As Jonathan Lee states, Roma would not face the same levels of marginalisation in the UK as they would in Eastern Europe, not only because people are more open, but because the state institutions are more robust, the democratic structures are stronger, anti-discrimination legislations are more advanced than in Eastern Europe (Lee 2018). Those Roma who have lived in the UK for some time are aware of their rights and the legal consequences people might face due to racial insults. This is something still hardly imaginable in Lithuania:

V: Out there we are not different from anyone else. There is plenty like us. Out there no one would dare say something like: 'Oh look, a Gypsy *is going'. If you hear something like this, that's it, you can write a complaint. You can report it. You can write a complaint on this person, and he will pay, he will be paying all his life…*

P: It means a person offended me, and it is not allowed there, we are protected from this. And here… impossible… (Patrina, 43, and Vladimir, 44).

Here, they feel and are made to feel *chernyye* (Rus. Blacks) (Germanas, 16), *there* they are "one of many" (Marina, 35). Roma have been historically placed at the bottom of the societal hierarchy, objectified by the state policies and social stratification leaving few possibilities to get out (Grill 2012). In England, Roma are not, ultimately, perceived as one fixed ethnic group, they can acquire and manifest several identities. Marina felt content that no one would recognise her as Roma when she lived in England. "No one would even guess" – she admits. There was one situation, though. She was working in a yarn manufactory, and one of her colleagues was an older mechanic, in his 70s. It was a really hot day, and, in order to protect herself from the rising dust, she decided to tie a head scarf. The story continued as following:

Just a simple head scarf [Marina laughing – my remark]*, but just in a way how we do it. In Lithuania, people would immediately guess that I am Roma. But there, only this one man, this really old man. He was really nice, a good person, and he started to observe me. I worked with him for so many years, but only when I tied that head scarf, he came to me and asked: 'Aren't you Roma?'* [Marina laughing hard – my remark]. *I answered him: 'Yes, I am Roma'. And he continued: 'Only now I got it that you are somehow different, you are not Russian'. Because we would present ourselves as Russians. They would ask us 'Where are you from?' and we used to say: 'Lithuania'. 'What is your nationality?' And we would answer: 'We are Russians'. So it was always Russians, Russians. And only that one time, only that older man figured out that I am Roma but he didn't do or say anything. He knew what that was. 'Are you Roma?' 'Yes, I am' and that's it. There was nothing extraordinary about it* (Marina, 30).

It was a conscious decision of Marina and her friends, working in that factory, to present themselves as Russians. 'Juggling with identities' was one of the personal strategies exploiting the invisibility. While speaking with each other, every now and then Marina and her relatives would use some Russian words and, hence, their colleagues would rarely question their ethnicity. Other times they would be identified as Bulgarians or Serbians. This practice represents one of the possible strategies of processing (and dealing with) imposed identities. "In Lithuania it would be impossible" – Marina laughs.

"There is no place dearer than here" – rethinking personal belonging

The perception of the 'abroad' is not unambiguous, though. From the previous section, it may seem that Vilnius Roma recognise England/*užsienis* (Lit. foreign countries/ abroad) as inevitable for *a better life*. However, the imagination of a good life *here* and *there* is more complex. Those who are moving are claimed to "become multi-local: found and retained in more than one locality" (Tedeschi et. al. 2020). However, the tensions in the multi-localness are unavoidable, and personal attachments to these multiple localities can vary greatly. Migration, adaptation and staying are described as "not fixed processes, but are instead a relentless negotiation" (Tedeschi et. al. 2020, 5). Even though life abroad brings more social and financial stability and assures invisibility, *here* always remains *namai* (Lit. home) or *gimtinė* (Lit. motherland), ensures a sense of belonging.

Marius has never been to Western Europe to visit his siblings. Only once, back in the 1990s, he had a work-related visit to Białystok, Poland. Marius was invited to go to England or Denmark many times, but he refused because:

> *There is everything here, in Lithuania, for me, I was born here, I grew up here, and I feel the best here. My relatives, brothers and sisters were inviting me to come: 'You will come, you will have a place to live, you could live well, we will find you a wife.' No, no, I declined their offers. What will I do in that England, I will be a stranger there, I don't speak the language. In Lithuania I am* savas žmogus *(Lit. insider/I belong here)* (Marius, 55).

In the case of Marius, the sense of belonging outrivals the potential physical and social well-being. He heard many success stories of his siblings starting 'new lives' abroad, but he was never lured by them. He pointed many times that 'abroad' gives many more possibilities for Roma, however, he imagines 'abroad' as a place not for him, somewhere he would not feel really well. Attachment to the place of birth can be very sentimental but also be related to very practical concerns assuring a sense of belonging – understanding the language plays a huge role in feeling "to be among homeys" (Marius, 55).

Natalija visited England three times. She visited her brothers, spent time with her daughter, worked in a factory for a while. However, she could not remain longer than for a few months each time, she had "an urge to come back home where it's best for her" (Viktorija, 25). Natalija is convinced that if "the local government would help its people, no one would ever leave the country" (Natalija, 50). My informants stated that there should be reforms in the social welfare system, new labour market regulations, so everyone could find a work easily, earn more, provide for their children, buy food and clothes. If there were better conditions related to housing and employment possibilities for Roma, "no one would even consider going abroad. It's our country, it's our homeland, *niekur nėra nieko mielesnio* (Lit. there is no place dearer than here)" (Natalija, 50). Aldona shares a similar opinion: "We like to live here, we like Lithuania, just I wish the system worked better, if it did, it would be easier for us, nobody would leave. I was abroad a few times, worked there, but it's not for me, I did not like it, my place is here." It shows that staying is an active process of considerations and negotiations – people not just passively stayed behind those who moved abroad, but they are also choosing between several options. Carling proposes not to conceptualise the wish to stay as "the absence of migration aspirations, but rather as the presence of aspirations to remain in place" (Carling 2014, 12).

England is receiving criticism because of filth and dirt on the streets. It is contrasted with the neat and well-kept parks, walking trails, pavements in Vilnius. I spoke to Vlada after she returned from Liverpool in late October. She could not forget how "dirty it was *there.* Wherever you go, you find litter on the streets" (Vlada, 18). Germanas confirmed similar information. He has not seen it himself, but he already envisions England as a place "where people just throw trash on the pavement and they walk over this garbage" (Germanas, 16). His criticism of 'abroad' does not end here. For Germanas, "*užsienis* (Lit. foreign countries) changes people." After emigrating, people become arrogant. All of Germanas' friends who went abroad changed. They grew up together, *viename kieme* (Lit. in the same yard), everyone was friendly back then, but now when they come back to Lithuania, "they do not communicate with us anymore, they don't want to" (Germanas, 16). Germanas concludes: "I don't want to be like that."

Final notes

As my research shows, *here* and *there* became key points of reference for the informants. When discussing the meaning of a better life, there is a constant comparison between lives in Lithuania and abroad. (Im)mobility experiences are strongly dictated by both personal migratory experiences and imaginations shaped by the stories of others. Ethnic identification and various implications referred to it have become one of the binding elements among my informants linking it to their (im)mobility experiences. *Here* is a place where Roma are always spotted and stigmatised, while *there* assures invisibility and, hence, more opportunities. Circulating ideals about the 'abroad' can be perceived as disappointment with the life *here* – what is idealised, fantasised and seen as a goal *out there*, it is what people would wish to have in Lithuania. I would state that, for Vilnius Roma, (im)mobility imaginations can be seen as a space for social critique of experienced inequality and injustice. However, the picture happens to be much more complex than it could seem from the first sight. There is no *perfect place* – (im)mobility experiences, through a comparative perspective, allow Vilnius Roma families to renegotiate their relationship with different localities and gain critical distance to both of them. (Im)mobility experiences become "meaning-making and world-shaping devices" (Salazar 2010) which help to understand the surrounding, to rethink personal conditions, ethnicity, social and cultural rights, based on persistent comparison and new knowledge (and imaginations) about life *here* and *there*.

Bibliography

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Appadurai, Arjun. 2004. The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition In: Rao, Vijayendra, Michael Walton, eds. *Culture and Public Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Carling, Jørgen. 2008. The Human Dynamics of Migrant Transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 31*(8): 1452–1477.

Carling, Jørgen. 2014. *The Role of Aspirations in Migration*. Conference paper at Determinants of International Migration. University of Oxford.

Chambers, Thomas. 2018. Continuity in Mind: Imagination and Migration in India and the Gulf. *Modern Asian Studies, 52*(4): 1420-1456.

Fiałkowska, Kamila, Michał Garapich, and Elzbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz. 2018(a). Antropologia migracji polskich Romów – wypełnianie luki w badaniach migracyjnych i antropologicznych. *Studia Romologica, 11.*

Fiałkowska, Kamila, Michał Garapich, and Elzbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz. 2018(b). Krytyczna analiza naukowej ciszy, czyli dlaczego Romowie migrują (z naszego pola widzenia). *CMR Working Papers, 108*(166).

Fiałkowska, Kamila, Michał Garapich, and Elzbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz. 2018(c). *Migration paths of Polish Roma: Between tradition and change*. Final report, Centre of Migration research, University of Warsaw.

Fiałkowska, Kamila, Michał Garapich, Elzbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz, Sonia Styrkacz, and Monika Szewczyk. 2020. Transnational e-Easter at the Time of Pandemic. The Case Study of the Polish Roma Families in Poland and Abroad. *CMR Spotlight, 12*(18): 16–21.

Gray, Breda. 2011. Becoming Non-migrant: Lives Worth Waiting for. *Gender, Place & Culture, 18*(3): 417–432.

Grill, Jan. 2012. 'Going up to England': Exploring Mobilities among Roma from Eastern Slovakia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 38*(8): 1269–1287.

Grill, Jan. 2018. 'In England they don't call you black!' Migrating Racialisations and the Production of Roma Difference across Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(7): 1136–1155.

Hjälm, Anna. 2011. *A Family Landscape: On the Geographical Distances Between Elderly Parents and Adult Children in Sweden*. Doctoral dissertation. Umeå University, Sweden.

Hjälm, Anna. 2014. 'The Stayers': Dynamics of Lifelong Sedentary Behaviour in an Urban Context. *Population, Space and Place, 20*(6): 569–580.

Ingold, Tim. 2013. Dreaming of Dragons: on the Imagination of Real Life. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 19*: 734–752.

Jónsson, Gunvor. 2008. *Migration Aspirations and Immobility in a Malian Soninke Village*. Working paper for International Migration Institute. University of Oxford: 1–45.

Kocze, Angela, van Baar, Huub. (ed.). 2020. *The Roma and Their Struggles for Identity inContemporary Europe.* Berghahn: New York, London.

Kontvainė, Vita. 2020. *Romų tautybės asmenų padėtis 2020 m.* Sociological research report, access online: https://tmde.lrv.lt/uploads/tmde/documents/files/Rom%C5%B3%20pad%C4%-97tis%202020_TYRIMO%20ATASKAITA_galutin%C4%97%20(002).pdf   [accessed   20 March 2021].

Lee, Jonathan. 2018. The Deep Dive, *Jonathan Lee on Anti-Gypsyism – The cancer at the heart of Europe*, episode 9, access online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqfNu4VhgZo [accessed 18 March 2021].

Magazzini, Tina, Piemontese, Stefano. 2016. Roma Migrations in the EU: The Case of Spain Between 'New' and 'Old' Minorities. *Migration Letters*, *13*(2), 228-241.

Magazzini, Tina, Piemontese, Stefano (ed.). 2019. *Constructing Roma Migrants: European Narratives and Local Governance*, Cham: Springer Open.

Mata-Codesal, Diana. 2018. Is It Simpler to Leave or to Stay Put? Desired Immobility in a Mexican Village. *Population, Space and Place, 24*(4): 1–9.

Mata-Codesal, Diana. 2015. Ways of Staying Put in Ecuador: Social and Embodied Experiences of Mobility-Immobility Interactions. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 41*(14): 1–20.

Messing, Vera. 2019. Conceptual and Methodological Considerations in Researching "Roma Migration". In: Magazzini, Tina, Stefano Piemontese, eds. *Constructing Roma Migrants: European Narratives and Local Governance*, Cham: Springer Open.

Preece, Jenny. 2017. Immobility and Insecure Labour Markets: An Active Response to Precarious Employment. *Urban Studies, 55*(8), 1783-1799.

Römhild, Regina. 2003. *Practised Imagination. Tracing Transnational Networks in Crete and Beyond*. Research Group Transnationalism Working Paper Number 3.

Salazar, Noel B. 2010. Towards an Anthropology of Cultural Mobilities. *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture, 1*(1): 53–68.

Salazar, Noel B. 2011. The Power of Imagination in Transnational Migration. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 18*(6): 576–598.

Salazar, Noel B. 2020. On Imagination and Imaginaries, Mobility and Immobility: Seeing the Forest for the Trees. *Culture & Psychology, 26*(4): 768–777.

Sardelić, Julija. 2019. Differing Romani Mobilities? The Case of Cross-Border Migration of Roma Between Slovenia and Austria. [in:] Magazzini T., Piemontese S. (ed.), *Constructing Roma Migrants: European Narratives and Local Governance*, Cham: Springer Open.

Schewel, Kerilyn. 2015. *Understanding the Aspiration to Stay*. COMPAS working papers, Oxford.

Schewel, Kerilyn, Carling, Jørgen. 2018. Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(6): 945–963.

Sørensen, Ninna Nyberg and Karen Fog Olwig. 2001. Mobile Livelihoods: Making a Living in the World. In: Sørensen, Ninna Nyberg and Karen Fog Olwig, eds. *Work and Migration: Life and Livelihoods in a Globalizing World, London*. New York: Routledge.

Stockdale, Aileen and Tialda Haartsen. 2018. Editorial Introduction: Putting Rural Stayers in the Spotlight. *Population, Space and Place, 24*(4), 1–8.

Tamagno, Carla. 2001. 'You must Win their Affection…': Migrants' Social and Cultural Practices between Peru and Italy. In: Sørensen, Ninna Nyberg and Karen Fog Olwig, eds. *Work and Migration: Life and Livelihoods in a Globalizing World*. London, New York: Routledge.

Tedeschi, Miriam, Vorobeva, Ekaterina, Jauhiainen, Jussi S. 2020. Transnationalism: Current Debates and New Perspectives. *GeoJournal,* 87: 603–619.

Tremlett, Annabel. 2014. Making a Difference without Creating a Difference: Super-Diversity as a New Direction for Research on Roma Minorities. *Ethnicities*, *14*(6), 830-848

Jingzhong, Ye. 2018. Stayers in China's "Hollowed-out" Villages: A Counter Narrative on Massive Rural-Urban Migration. *Population, Space and Place, 24*(3), 1-10.